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A19 Camilli A20 Social Notes A22 Puzzles A24 Comics

STEPHAN MOCCIO thought the Vancouver Olympics deserved a song that would match the pomp and circumstances of the event. His composition, I Believe, electrified the nation

Making our country proud

Stephan Moccio says I Believe inspired thousands of emails from children.

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JUAN RODRIGUEZ

When Stephan Moccio steps out of a downtown luxury hotel elevator to greet a journalist, it's as if he's walking on air. The composer of the Vancouver Olympics theme song I Believe – the song that bonded a nation – is impossibly good-looking, with wavy black hair, a lantern jaw, and plenty of eye contact. His crisp white shirt and pressed black pants heightens the image of someone who, in seemingly otherworldly fashion, seamlessly straddles the lines that blur between classical, pop, New Age, and ambient music.

I Believe – sung in English by Nikki Yanofsky and French by Annie Villeneuve – had an almost Pavlovian hold on Canadians. More than 250 different versions, cues and clips reflected an array of emotions in our winter pageant of athleticism and beauty. As I watched the Olympics from start to finish, I woke up and drifted to sleep with his infernal fanfare ringing in my head.

I asked Moccio if there was some science or psychology behind the tune that was unleashed upon the nation exactly one week before the Games began.

"That was my goal. It was premeditated in that we had long talks with CTV about when to release it. I just wanted to offer that feeling of majesty and hope, of pomp and circumstance, throughout the country. My gripe with Canada is that most of the time we're such a polite country, and I just wanted us to feel proud."

After mentioning that I Believe was played in over 5,000 elementary schools, often replacing the national anthem, he adds: "That was a cultural thing I never expected – the thousands of emails we received from kids."

The song has sold over 200,000 copies, topping the Canadian charts for four consecutive weeks, and becoming the most downloaded tune by a Canadian since Nelson Soundscan started keeping such records five years ago.

Now 31, he's written for Céline Dion (A New Day Has Come), Sarah Brightman (What You Never Know) and Josh Groban (My Heart Was Home Again), collaborated with such artists as Jessica Simpson, Fergie, N'Sync, Nick Lachey, Jon Bon Jovi, Sarah McLachlan and James Taylor. He's worked on music for Bill Clinton's 60th birthday fete, and gives annual private concerts for Robert Redford.

Moccio enjoys an especially passionate following in Québec, where his debut album, the solo piano Exposure, sold 40,000 copies, a first for an instrumental work since Chariots of Fire turned the trick in 1982.

I Believe, he says, "started as a childhood dream. I wanted to write an Olympic theme when I heard the one for Calgary in 1988 by David Foster. When Vancouver won the bid, I had an immediate flash and literally sang it into my dictaphone, and held onto it for a few years.

"I also went into research mode. I'm a huge fan of John Williams's theme for the 1984 Los Angeles games. I wanted Canada to have an identity, a brand, so that when people heard the fanfare in their kitchen or living room, it was time to watch the games, and get pumped up. The John Williams theme did just that." When Moccio presented his tune (with lyrics by Alan Frew of Glass Tiger) to Olympic officials, "they immediately fell in love with it."

It took nearly two years for Moccio to write and arrange the 250-plus cues, finally conducting and recording with members of the Montreal Symphony Orchestra at McGill's state-of-the-art studio in Schulich Hall. "The last six months I was working almost daily, very intense. It was a composer's dream to exercise my muscle. I even had a hip-hop version for the skateboarders.

"Locked up in my studio, I drew from the journey of the athlete, and the music was like a soundtrack to a film. A great soundtrack has a wonderful melody with variations woven throughout the journey. That's exactly how we saw it: We knew there were going to be highs and lows."

Moccio met Yanofsky, the Montreal teen who sang I Believe, at last year's Juno Awards, and wrote with her that summer. "I had this crazy idea we should go with somebody relatively unknown, but above all young. Call it a cliché, but I wanted to rally the youth, because when I think of the Olympics, I think of children, and that gives me hope. Children's choirs really move me."

Although Moccio lives in Toronto and increasingly works in New York, he claims a natural affinity for Montreal, where he finalizes a Québec tour with a three-night stand at Place des Arts next month.

"French is my mother tongue – my mum's from Québec City – but I'm outside of the province enough to have a quasi-exotic appeal. I belong to Québec, but also I don't. Does that make sense? I know people well enough to feel that when something comes from the outside we tend to think it's better.

"But the fundamental reason is that people here love melody, and I'm a guy who writes melodies. Hands down, the passionate Québec audiences are among my favourites.

"The charts in Québec are so different from the U.S. or English Canada. I believe there's a really sophisticated palate here. Somehow, the public is not totally controlled by the media. In Québec people have more options to choose from and react, so you might see a more genuine response. Something very poetic can top the charts here."

And, in his own way, Moccio injected pop poetry to Canada's Olympic legacy. "We really wanted to be the best in the world, and I had never seen that from Canadians. I think we're a changed nation because of it. There was an emotional crash (when it was over) because we didn't expect it to be that powerful. I think we're still letting it ferment, and see how it stands the test of time."

Stephan Moccio performs at the Cinquième Salle of Place des Arts, May 13 to 15, at 8 p.m. Tickets are $27.15 at the box office. Call 514-842-2112 or go to laplacedesarts.com. His web site is www.stephanmoccio.com.

Text RODRIGUEZ125 to 11-2-11 to get more, or share. Standard text messaging rates apply.

CONCERT REVIEW

Stage neophyte Gainsbourg a work in progress

Chanteuse fails to capitalize on built-in drama

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Charlotte Gainsbourg, actor and sometime singer, had a big challenge to meet Friday night at the Olympia.

There is a vast difference between spending parts of a year and half leisurely creating music in the studio with Beck (a huge fan of her legendary louche dad, Serge), and – as someone accustomed to many takes for film but whose stage experience is very limited – performing in-the-moment before a hugely expectant full house. So she started with the benefit of a built-in, cliff-hanging drama to the occasion: could she succeed?

A willowy, unconventional beauty in a sleeveless white top and slim pants, Gainsbourg is said to be nervous before shows, finally resolving to let things happen. It would not hurt if she tried to make them happen, rather than blend in with her band's dreamy, slick soundtrack.

There is still a trace of the naïf talent she displayed singing Lemon Incest with her father in the mid-1980s, when he produced her debut album Charlotte Forever, a willingness to try anything. Such openness scandalized France back then, but scandal – or anything approaching emotion – was unlikely to sprout from her undernourished, generally flat performance. I kept waiting for something to happen.

Opening up with a string of songs written by Beck for the new album IRM, at first her breathy voice seemed to offer a retro echo – she could have been one of the Paris Sisters singing for Phil Spector in the early '60s. The mood is immediately atmospheric, but wears thin quickly; the languid attack grew monotonous and, worse, devolved into a sort of little-girl-lost plaint.

By the time she tried out Just Like A Woman, the Dylan classic, she sounded only like a pale echo of the version her mother, Jane Birkin, recently recorded. There is a distinct lack of personality in Charlotte Gainsbourg's voice; you can't even call her cool because her struggle to project gets in her way.

There were moments when the incandescent lighting, illuminating the black-and-grey urban-scene backdrop, added a noirish existentialism to the show, especially to IRM, the single. Selections from her previous album 5:55, largely written by Jarvis Cocker, punctuated the proceedings, and the band had moments of subtle sonorities.

Maybe because this was the largest audience of her Québec tour – she played the Olympia again last night – she might have felt intimidated. But the best you can say about Charlotte Gainsbourg, stage neophyte, is that she is a work in progress.

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PHOTO GALLERY
View Tim Snow's photos of Charlotte Gainsbourg's show at our photos page:
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TIM SNOW THE GAZETTE

Charlotte Gainsbourg: the distinct lack of personality in her voice was exacerbated by her struggles to project.

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